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Classics Revisited

The landscape of Cultural Geography: ideologies lost

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The landscape of Cultural Geography: ideologies lost

Denis Cosgrove's legacy was to inspire an interdisciplinary re-visioning of landscape as a cultural concept in the West. And to create a space for temporally situated critical, scholarly and morally good, academic practice. In particular his focus was Geography's visual cultural politics, which he sought to unravel and enrich as a writer, teacher and educator. Cosgrove's own vision for cultural geography was for it to be attuned with humanism and its moral principles, whilst retaining a commitment to the value of aesthetics, not as free-floating, but as historically situated and contextualised. Lowenthal (2008) argues that for Cosgrove (as was for John Ruskin), beauty was 'inseparable from goodness and truth'. Being was about doing progressive good at a world-scale. At heart was a question of '(H)ow should we live our lives in a way that is fulfilling and morally proper?'

In Cosgrove and Jackson's paper *Directions in Cultural Geography* (1987), it is clear that a 20th century vision for the sub-discipline was to attend to 'making good' a reified account of culture that separated 'high/elite' and 'low/popular' through lessons learned from Marxist cultural studies, whilst being driven by an ideological account of how culture mattered. Culture was not peripheral, but needed to be seen as 'the very medium through which social change is experienced, contested and constituted' (1997, p95). Cosgrove and Jackson (1987) rejected an account of *progressive* directions which could only be addressed through *social* geography, empiricism and attendance to 'low' or 'popular' culture. Beauty, art, and the project of the humanities *per se* was at stake for *all* of humanity itself. Being at the heart of human consciousness, it was important that 'high' art and culture should prevail in the domain of everyday engagements of geographical study. The sites of art, culture and performance were not tangential to the *real* matters of radical change, but were rather embedded in a project challenging the values through which they were figured, and the material structures that reproduced them as 'high' culture and thus exclusionary. Poetry, art, architecture, sculpture, and performative cultures were not then left as areas for the elite or for study by 'elitist' academic disciplines, but were the very sites through which a radical re-figuring of cultural geography was produced.

For Cosgrove and Jackson (1987) the way forward was to optimise the cooperation between Humanist cultural geography and Marxist social geography. Humanism was about embracing the progressive project of liberating, developing and valuing the potential possibilities of human consciousness, whilst eradicating the obstacles to universal rights. Jackson's concern is to re-tether the potential of cultural geography to the material. Through his work he has inspired *material geographies* that expanded geography's concerns with the *agency* of things, but also to the methodological practices of social anthropology. The lessons from social anthropology are resonant in our accounts of 'follow the thing', ethnography and concerns with situated cultural enquiry.

The interface between cultural geography, the humanities and social sciences has expanded. The borders and realms of *legitimate* academic research have expanded and been re-shaped. Re-formed are the ways in which academics think and do culture. The innovations in research practice that emerge have led to poetry, art, theatre, music performances, exhibitions, curating, and film-making (to name just a few) to be included as tools for the production and dissemination of geographical knowledge. There has been an expansion in cultural geography's vocabularies and the grammars through which we engage, reflect and intervene with the world. Much of this 21st century landscape

of cultural geography is a legacy of innovations and interventions first inspired by Cosgrove and Jackson's call.

Materialities gained

We've moved away from interpretive strategies that offer a singularised account of meaning and value of a cultural product (albeit landscape, a piece of music, or a novel). The productive landscape of cultural geography does not occupy itself with simple readings of culture as evidence. The engagement with culture is not obsessive about the very medium of culture i.e. text, painting, or object. Instead there is a multi-faceted engagement with culture, sensitive to embodiment, performativities, immaterialities, absences and contingencies of meaning, expression and interpretation. However in this current maelstrom of *more-than-representational* cultural geographies there is a turning away (albeit sometimes unconsciously) from explicit accounts of the inequalities of power, race, class and the economies of production. There are many newly created practices within *creative geographies*, which risk a detachment from a programme of commitment to radical change. Despite being positioned as *new*, as a *turn*, or as an encounter-with a radical, novel, innovative and inspiring realm of practice, cultural geography has distanced itself from the roots of *cultural materialism*. Whilst much material practice has changed, much ground has been gained in methodological practice, such as the new methodologies of emotional and material geographies, or the anthropologically influenced *thick descriptions* and *autoethnography*. There are risks embedded in these innovative trajectories when they lack the underpinnings of the ethics and aims of *progress*. The humanist origins of *progress* have been posited in the discipline as anachronistic, masculinist, and exclusionary, yet the new paradigms within cultural geography are perhaps sometimes without political aim, or indeed without robust inter-disciplinary dialogue, respect and contextual practice. Cosgrove and Jackson's model of work is all about being respectfully engaged, modest, scholarly, generous, grounded, fine-tuned research practice- a practice that is politically important. Through the contemporary realms of visual geographies, we are ourselves producing a plethora of cultural texts such as images, maps, paintings within the formats of art, walks and of exhibition curatorship; modern takes on 'cabinets of curiosities'. These formats are radical but perhaps continue to elide the vile spectacles of the contemporary geopolitics of forced migration, food poverty, human slavery, toxic environments, and the racisms implicit in the 'war on terror'.

Paradise lost / Ideologies lost

Simultaneous to the demise of humanism, post-human sensibilities are figured as needing attention including the erasure of any nature-culture synthesis in the biosphere. In the same way that postcolonial geographies re-figured the cultural map/text beyond colonial centres, the conceptual spheres of the Anthropocene have also refigured cultural geography's field of vision beyond human sensibilities and bodies. Here, there is an historically sensitised account of *origins and endings* (Yusoff, 2016) that re-figures our lens, as did Cosgrove's (1994) account of the effect of NASA's Apollo photographs of the earth from the moon. However, the texture of this new *paradise lost* is unforgiving in its scale and immanence.

It is ironic that in an age where 'impact' of academic research is measured and rewarded, the humanist imperative to make things just and fair for humanity, has been elided by a thin post-humanist politics. Whilst worthy, post-humanist imperatives have created an enclave for ideas and

philosophies that do the very things that cultural geography was being led away from in the 1980s, a space that is driven by ideas but largely vacated of a political agenda and commitment to social action. In its place is a neo-liberal sensibility that resonates with stirring idealisms that are often without an ideological or moral commitment to principles that challenge injustice and uneven geographies within and outside the academy. A raft of practices actively steers us through accounts of being beyond *text*, *representation*, and *material evidence*, but these have abandoned a mission toward a *radical cultural geography* that is recognisable as such. They serve the economies of academia without intention to effect systemic change. Thus in geography, culture has become much more of a 'residual category' than was imagined in the hey-day of cultural studies. Just as cultural-studies has been eradicated from our Higher Education curriculum, so has a self-conscious responsibility towards shifting power relations, attending to exclusion and inequality. Arguably, there is little room to be driven ideologically and achieve academic advancement. Cosgrove and Jackson's (1987) piece creates a space for a diversity of ideologies, which interleave with interdisciplinary practices, all undertaken with time-consuming scholarly focus on the *in-situ* practices of other disciplines. The economies of cultural-geography today mean that the time-space for this fine scholarship has to be won in a neoliberal sand-pit. An agenda for challenging dominant cultural values are or cannot always be placed in the bid. Academic freedoms, as much as ideological struggles, are vulnerable more than ever in our environments of teaching and research. These current environments are perhaps the antithesis of the landscape of cultural geography envisioned by Cosgrove and Jackson.

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